

2026 FEDERAL SPECIALTY CROP BLOCK GRANT PROGRAM

Request for Full Proposals

Released:
November 10, 2025

Full Proposals Due:
No later than 5:00 p.m. on December 19, 2025. No late submissions will be accepted

Interested applicants must submit a complete electronic Full proposal and grant application using the Department of Community and Economic Development's Electronic Single Application ("ESA") website, at: <https://www.esa.dced.state.pa.us>

Table of Contents

About the Program 2

Solicitation Process and Timeline 3

Funding Areas 5

Expected Measurable Outcomes and Indicators 6

Full Proposal Questions, Scoring, and Review Criteria 11

Requirements and Limitations 16

Review and Notification 18

About the Program

Purpose

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA) is pleased to announce a competitive solicitation process to award 2026 Federal Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) funds for projects that enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops. Specialty crops are defined as fruits and vegetables, dried fruit, tree nuts, horticulture, and nursery crops, including floriculture. Please visit USDA's web site at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/scbgp> to view a comprehensive list of eligible specialty crops, ineligible commodities, and examples of projects that enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops under the SCBGP.

Funding and Duration

PDA anticipates that approximately \$1 million will be awarded to projects enhancing the competitiveness of Pennsylvania specialty crops. A maximum grant award does not exist and neither PDA nor the SCBGP requires a cost sharing or matching requirement. During the FY 2024 and 2025 funding cycles, the average amount of funding, per award, totaled \$62,650 and \$74,140, respectively. All projects are subject to the availability of funds. Grant funds cannot be expended before September 30, 2026, or after September 29, 2029. PDA reserves the right to offer an award amount less than the amount requested.

Eligibility Requirements

Projects must enhance the competitiveness of U.S. or U.S. territory-grown specialty crops in either domestic or foreign markets. Each project must identify at least one expected measurable outcome and indicator that specifically demonstrates the project's impact in enhancing the competitiveness of eligible specialty crops. Funds will not be awarded for projects that benefit a particular commercial product or provide a profit to a single organization, institution, or individual. In addition, grant funds cannot be used to compete unfairly with private companies that provide equivalent products or services. Single organizations, institutions, and individuals are encouraged to participate as project partners. Proposals should be initiated by organizations, industry groups, or academic institutions, or should involve collaboration or partnerships between producers, industry groups, academics, or other organizations. Applicants may cooperate with any public or private organization or two or more individuals or organizations may propose a joint project. Applicants should describe how the project potentially affects and produces measurable outcomes for the specialty crop industry and/or the public rather than a single organization, institution, or individual. Multi-state projects are allowed but should provide solutions to problems that cross state boundaries. Multi-state partnership proposals must explain the impact the projects will have on a multi-state or national level.

Solicitation Process and Timeline

Competitive Grant Application Review Process

PDA's competitive solicitation process will be divided into two phases: Phase I, Full Proposal and Phase II, Final Grant Proposal. Full Proposal instructions are listed below. Projects with the highest combined scores will be invited to complete a Final Grant Proposal. All applicants will be notified of their grant application status, and whether they have been selected to complete the Phase II, Final Grant Proposal application. All Final Proposals must fully describe the project's purpose, objectives, beneficiaries, external support, measurable outcomes, indicators, data collection, budget narrative, oversight, and commitment. An applicant's failure to meet eligibility criterion by the application deadline may result in PDA's rejection of the award prior to or after the application review.

Phase I, Full Proposal

In Phase I, interested, eligible non-profit organizations, local, state, and federal government entities, for-profit organizations, producer groups, and colleges or universities must submit Full Proposals. Full Proposals must be submitted by **5:00 p.m. on December 19, 2025**, and must describe the project in a clear, concise manner and be responsive to the categories identified in the Full Proposal.

Once the Full Proposals have been collected by PDA and the submission deadline has expired, PDA will determine whether the submitted Full Proposals meet SCBG Program grant eligibility requirements and will assess all applicants' past grant performances (if any). A SCBG Program Field Review Panel will then be formed, which will likely be comprised of representatives from public agencies and non-profit entities with an interest and expertise in specialty crop food and agricultural systems. The panel will rank proposals against the evaluation criteria and questions listed on the Technical Evaluation Criteria Score Sheet. Depending on the nature of the Full Proposals, the panel may seek additional peer review for more specialized proposals.

Phase II, Final Grant Proposal

The panel will make recommendations as to which applicants should be invited to submit a Phase II, Final Grant Proposal. The panel will ultimately decide which projects will be invited to Phase II.

Full Proposal Submission Instructions

Interested applicants must apply by completing the Full Proposal application by using the Department of Community and Economic Development's Electronic Single Application ("ESA") website, at: <https://www.esa.dced.state.pa.us>.

Full Proposals must be submitted on or before **5:00 p.m. on December 19, 2025**. Questions regarding this grant and/or the competitive solicitation process should be directed to PDA at hzarefoss@pa.gov.

Phase I: Full Proposal	
Release Request for Full Proposals	November 10, 2025
Full Proposals Due	5:00 p.m. on December 19, 2025
Phase II: Final Grant Proposal (<i>by invitation only</i>)	
Invitation to Submit Final Proposals	January 2026
Final Proposals Due to PDA	March 2026
Award	
Announcement of Award Funding	September 2026

Funding Areas

Funding areas are intended to clearly define the SCBG Program priorities and help prospective applicants to both develop their projects and submit their projects in the most appropriate category.

In practice, Full Proposals might seem to address elements from multiple funding areas. However, applicants must select one of the areas listed in the Full Proposal.

Full Proposals should:

- Demonstrate a high likelihood of success.
- Describe the specialty crop grower benefit and grower connection to the project.
- Be scalable to the larger community.
- Demonstrate industry need and support.
- Illustrate a sustainable funding source beyond the life of the proposed grant; and
- Include an outreach component addressing how project results, research findings, and conclusions will be extended to specialty crop growers.

Funding Areas:

- Agriculture Education and Outreach
- Nutrition Education and Consumption
- Environmental Crop Research/Conservation
- Enhancement of Food Safety/Food Security
- Plant Pest and Disease Control
- Trade Enhancements/Innovations
- Good Agricultural Practices
- Good Handling Practices
- Good Manufacturing Practices
- Organic and Sustainable Production Practices

Expected Measurable Outcomes and Indicators

(Updated In 2025, per AMS performance measures)

Each project submitted must include at least one of the seven outcomes listed below and at least one of the indicators listed underneath the selected outcome(s). It is suggested to choose no more than three outcomes. If there are multiple sub-indicators under the selected indicator, select at least one.

Applicants must clearly explain how they will collect the required data to report on the outcome(s) and indicator(s). The progress of each indicator must be reported in the Annual Performance Report and the result in the Final Performance Report.

PDA will review the quality of the information received in subsequent performance reports and modify the outcomes and indicators as needed over time to lead to better results in showing the impact of the SCBG Program.

Outcome Measures and Indicators:

The grant program outcomes and performance measures outlined below reflect direct stakeholder feedback and provide a framework that allows grant recipients to evaluate project activities more accurately in relation to each program's statutory purpose.

For recipients, the measures are:

- Providing short- and long-term impact indicators.
- More accurately reflecting grant recipients' accomplishments.
- Reducing burden on grant applicants and recipients.
- Improving AMS' ability to report on the impact of its grant programs.
- Standardizing measures across programs where appropriate.

OUTCOME 1: Increasing Consumption and Consumer Purchasing of Specialty Crops

Indicators:

1.1 Total number of consumers who gained knowledge about specialty crops__.

1.1a Adults_____.

1.1b Children_____.

1.2 Total number of consumers who consumed more specialty crops_____.

1.2a Adults_____.

1.2b Children_____.

1.3 Number of additional specialty crop customers counted__.

1.4 Number of additional business transactions executed_____.

1.5 Increased sales measured in:

1.5a Dollars__.

1.5b Percent change ____.

1.5c Combination of volume and average price as a result of enhanced marketing activities_.

OUTCOME 2: Increasing Access to Specialty Crops and Expanding Specialty Crop Production and Distribution

Indicators:

2.1 Number of stakeholders that gained technical knowledge about producing, preparing, procuring, and/or accessing specialty crops_.

2.2 Number of stakeholders that reported producing, preparing, procuring, and/or accessing more specialty crops ____.

2.3 Total number of market access points for specialty crops developed or expanded ____.

Of those:

2.3a Number of new online portals created to sell specialty crops ____ .

2.3b Number with expanded seasonal availability ____.

2.3c Number of existing market access points that expanded specialty crop offerings ____.

2.3d Number of new market access points that established specialty crop offerings .

2.4 Number of stakeholders that gained knowledge about more efficient and effective distribution systems ____.

2.5 Number of stakeholders that adopted best practices or new technologies to improve distribution systems ____.

2.6 Total number of partnerships established between producers, distributors, and/or other relevant intermediaries related to distribution systems _____. Of those established:

2.6a Number formalized with written agreements (i.e. MOU's, signed contracts, etc.) ____

2.7 Total number of new/improved distribution systems developed____. Of those, the number that:

2.7a Stemmed from new partnerships ____.

2.7b Increased efficiency ____.

2.7c Reduced costs ____.

2.7d Increased specialty crop grower participation ____.

2.7e Increased online presence ____.

2.8 Number of specialty crop-related jobs:

2.8a Created ____.

2.8b Maintained ____.

2.9 Total number of new individuals who went into specialty crop production as a result of marketing _____. Of those, the number who are:

2.9a Beginning farmers or ranchers _____.

2.9b First time specialty crop producers _____.

2.10 Number of market access points that reported increased:

2.10a Revenue _____.

2.10b Sales _____.

2.10c Cost-savings _____.

OUTCOME 3: Increasing Food Safety Knowledge and Processes

Indicators:

3.1 Number of stakeholders that gained knowledge about prevention, detection, control, and/or intervention food safety practices, including relevant regulations (to improve their ability to comply with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) and/or meet the standards for aligned third party food safety audits such as Harmonized GAP/GHP) _____.

3.2 Number of stakeholders that:

3.2a Established a food safety plan _____.

3.2b Revised or updated their food safety plan _____.

3.3 Number of specialty crop stakeholders who implemented new/improved prevention, detection, control, and intervention practices, tools, or technologies to mitigate food safety risks (to improve their ability to comply with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) and/or meet the standards for aligned third party food safety audits such as Harmonized GAP/GHP) _____.

3.4 Number of prevention, detection, control, or intervention practices developed to mitigate food safety risks _____.

3.5 Number of stakeholders that used grant funds to:

3.5a Purchase _____.

3.5b Upgrade food safety equipment _____.

OUTCOME 4: Improve Pest and Disease Control Processes

Indicators:

4.1 Number of stakeholders that gained knowledge about science-based tools to combat pests and diseases _____.

4.2 Number of stakeholders that adopted pest and disease control best practices, technologies, or innovations _____.

4.3 Number of stakeholders trained in early detection and rapid response practices to

combat pests and diseases _____. Of those:

4.3a Number of additional acres managed using integrated pest management _____.

4.4 Number of stakeholders that implemented new diagnostic systems, methods, or technologies for analyzing specialty crop pests and diseases _____.

4.5. Total Number of producers/processors that enhanced or maintained pest and disease control practices _____. Of those, the number that reported:

4.5a Reduction in product lost to pest and diseases _____.

4.5b Improved crop quality _____.

4.5c Reduction in labor costs _____.

4.5d Reduction in pesticide use _____.

4.6 Number of producers/processors improving the efficiency of pest and disease control diagnostics and response testing, as reported by:

4.6a Improving speed _____.

4.6b Improving reliability _____.

4.6c Expanding capability _____.

4.6d Increasing testing (i.e. survey work for pests) _____.

OUTCOME 5: Develop New Seed Varieties and Specialty Crops

Indicators:

5.1 Number of cultivar and/or variety trials conducted _____. Of those:

5.1a The number that advanced to further stages of development _____.

5.2 Number of cultivars and/or seed varieties developed _____.

5.3 Number of cultivars and/or seed varieties released _____.

5.4 Number of growers adopting new cultivars and/or varieties _____.

OUTCOME 6: Expand Specialty Crop Research and Development

Indicators:

6.1 Number of research foals accomplished _____.

6.2 For research conclusions, the number that:

6.2a Yielding findings that supported continues research _____.

6.2b Yielding findings that led to completion of study _____.

6.2c Yielded findings that allow for implementation of new practice, process or technology _____.

6.3 Number of industry representatives and other stakeholders who engaged with research results _____.

6.4 Total number of research outputs published to industry publications and/or academic journals _____.

6.4a Number of views/reads of published research/data ____.

6.4b Number of citations counted ____.

OUTCOME 7: Improve Environmental Sustainability of Specialty Crops

Indicators:

7.1 Number of stakeholders that gained knowledge about environmental sustainability best practices, tools, or technologies ____.

7.2 Number of stakeholders reported with an intent to adopt environmental sustainability best practices, tools, or technologies ____.

7.3 Number of producers that adopted environmental best practices or tools ____.

7.4 Number of new tools/technologies developed or enhanced to improve sustainability/conservation or other environmental outcomes ____.

7.5 Number of additional acres managed with sustainable practices, tools, or technologies that focused on:

7.5a Water Quality/conservation ____.

7.5b Soil health ____.

7.5c Biodiversity ____.

7.5d Reduction in energy use ____.

7.5e Other positive environmental outcomes (optional) ____.

7.6 Number of additional acres established and maintained for the mutual benefit of pollinators/specialty crops ____.

Full Proposal Questions, Scoring, and Review Criteria

Applicants must respond to the following questions in the Full Proposal. Failure to fully complete the Full Proposal will result in disqualification.

Organization Detail (not a scored question):

This section should provide project contact information.

Project Title (not a scored question):

Keep the project title brief and descriptive, use proper capitalization, and limit it to 15 words or fewer.

Duration of Project (not a scored question):

All projects will begin no earlier than October 1, 2026, and end no later than September 29, 2029.

Project Partner and Summary (not a scored question):

A Project Summary provides a very brief (one sentence, if possible) description of your project.

Project Purpose (25 points):

In two or three paragraphs, identify the specific and existing issue, problem, or need the project will address, and explain why the proposal is important and timely for the specialty crop industry.

Scoring Criteria: Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal states the specific issue, problem, or need the project will address, the timeliness and relevance to the specialty crop industry, if it will provide a direct benefit to the specialty crop industry, and if the approach is rational and sound

Listing of Objectives that the project hopes to achieve (not a scored question):

Provide no more than three one-sentence objectives that can be reported as either “completed” or “not completed” at the time of reporting.

Project Beneficiaries (not a scored question):

Estimate the total number of project beneficiaries as a whole number.

Statement of Enhancing Specialty Crops (not a scored question):

Check the box to confirm that this project enhances the competitiveness of specialty crops in accordance with and defined by the Farm Bill.

Continuation Project Information (not a scored question):

Will this project continue the efforts of a previously funded SCBGP project? Indicate Yes or No. If Yes, please complete all related fields.

Other Support from Federal or State Grant Programs (not a scored question):

The SCBGP will not fund duplicative projects. If your project is receiving or will receive support from another federal or state program, respond “Yes” and complete all fields of this section.

External Project Support (10 points):

Other than the applicant and organizations involved in the project, please describe the specialty crop stakeholders who support this project and why.

Expected Measurable Outcomes/Indicators (25 points):

Proposals must result in at least one of the seven outcomes as predetermined by USDA. It is suggested to choose no more than three. Identify the outcome measure the project will achieve and the indicator of success for the outcome. Choose outcome indicators that can be measured and reported within the project's period of performance.

Scoring Criteria: Scoring will be based on the outcome and indicator selected and the extent to which they are precise, attainable, and meet the purpose of the grant program and will significantly benefit stakeholders.

Data Collection to Report on Outcomes and Indicators (25 points):

Describe in detail how the project will collect the data needed to report on selected performance measures (e.g., use of surveys to establish a baseline and measure change over time).

Scoring Criteria: Scoring will be based up on how the data will be collected and how well the project will accomplish the outcome and indicator selected. The application must present a clear, well-conceived, and suitable overall methodology for fulfilling the goals and objectives of the proposed project.

Budget Narrative (15 points):

The Budget Summary table will automatically calculate funds requested from inputs in the sub-categories of the budget narrative.

Scoring Criteria: The extent to which the budget is reasonable and consistent with the project's purpose, outcome, and indicator, and whether it is feasible that the proposed work can be accomplished given the proposed budget. Cost sharing is not a requirement for SCBGP. Do not include such funds in the Budget Narrative.

Personnel: Enter employees whose time and effort can be accurately traced to project activities. Respond to all fields in the table. Salary and wage costs for individuals not employed by the applicant organization must be listed under Contractual.

Fringe Benefits: Estimate the total fringe benefit costs for the each of the employees described in the Personnel section if applicable. Fringe benefit costs for individuals, not employed by the applicant organization, must be listed under Contractual.

Travel: Calculate the costs for the travel by taking into account destinations, number of trips, days traveling, transportation costs, estimated mileage rate, and estimated lodging and meal costs. Travel costs for individuals not employed by the applicant organization must be listed under Contractual. Please mark the “Conforming with your Travel Policy” box.

Equipment: Estimate the costs for any special purpose equipment to be purchased. Special purpose equipment is an article of nonexpendable, tangible personal property having a useful life of more than one year and an acquisition cost which equals or exceeds \$5,000 to be used only for research, scientific, or other technical activities. Within the description column, indicate the type of special purpose equipment to be purchased and complete all fields for each item.

Special purpose equipment is allowable, with prior approval for acquisition costs and rental costs, provided the following criterion is met:

1. Necessary for the research, scientific, or other technical activities of the grant award.
2. Not otherwise reasonably available and accessible.
3. The type of equipment is normally charged as a direct cost by the organization.
4. Acquired in accordance with organizational practices.
5. Must only be used to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops.
6. More than one single commercial organization, commercial product, or individual must benefit from the use of the equipment.
7. Must not use special purpose equipment acquired with grant funds to provide services for a fee to compete unfairly with private companies that provide equivalent services; and
8. Equipment is subject to the full range of acquisition, use, management, and disposition requirements under 2 CFR 200.313 as applicable.

Prior written approval for allowable costs, that were not included in the approved project and/or the latest budget, include rental of land, special purpose equipment, organization costs, and rearrangement and reconversion costs. If a request is made, it must include the following:

1. A description of and justification for the cost including how it furthers the objectives of the project; and
2. If applicable, a comparison between the most recent budget and the proposed budget as well as an updated budget narrative of the affected cost categories.

If purchasing or renting equipment, identify the item and its value. Capital expenditures for general purpose equipment, buildings, and land are unallowable. If the cost per unit is under \$5,000, then include this item(s) under Supplies.

Supplies: Estimate the costs for supplies to be purchased. Supplies are items with an acquisition cost of less than \$5,000 per unit that are used exclusively for the objectives of the project. Within the description column, provide a brief explanation of the types of supplies needed for the project. General use office supplies (paper, printer ink, pens, et cetera) are considered indirect costs under the CSCBG Program.

Contractual: Estimate the costs for any work on the project that will be performed by individuals not employed by the applicant organization (consultants, contractors, partner organizations, et cetera).

Other: Estimate all other costs such as conferences or meetings, speaker/trainer fees, publication costs, data collection, and other budgeted costs associated with the project.

Indirect Costs: Indirect costs cannot exceed eight percent (8%) of the project's direct cost. Indirect costs represent the expenses of doing business that are not readily identified with a particular grant, contract, project function or activity, but are necessary for the general operation of the organization and the conduct of activities it performs.

Program Income: Estimate the amount of income (if any) that may be generated by a supported activity or earned as a result of the award. Within the description column, explain how program income may be generated. Program income cannot be used as profit for an organization and must be reinvested back into the project.

Total number of points in the Full Proposal: 100.

Requirements and Limitations

Federal Cost Principles

Federal cost principles are regulations based on organization type used to determine allowable costs and ensure consistent treatment of costs. Applicants are responsible for identifying the federal cost principles appropriate to their organization and consistent application of cost principles to the SCBG Program grant funds. They are used to ensure contractors or consultants comply with federal cost principal requirements.

- State, local or Indian tribal governments, non-profit organizations, colleges and universities will be subject to 2 CFR 200.
- For-profit organizations will be subject to 48 CFR Subpart 31.2.

Indirect Costs

The maximum indirect cost rate is eight percent (8%) of project's direct cost.

Applicants are responsible for presenting costs incurred for the same purpose in like circumstances consistently and must not include costs associated with an established indirect cost rate agreement as direct costs. In addition, applicants cannot allocate a cost as a direct cost if it is also incurred as an indirect cost for the same purpose and vice versa.

Direct costs are costs that can be identified specifically with a particular award, project, program, service, or other organizational activity or that can be directly assigned to such an activity relatively easily with a high degree of accuracy. Typically, direct costs include, but are not limited to, compensation of employees who work directly on the award to include salaries and fringe benefits, travel that is necessary for the project, and equipment and supplies used for the project to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops.

Indirect costs (also known as “facilities and administrative costs”) are costs incurred for common or joint objectives that cannot be identified specifically with a particular project, program, or organizational activity. Below are typical indirect costs for specific types of organizations. The salaries of administrative and clerical staff should normally be treated as indirect costs. Direct charging of these costs may be appropriate where all of the following conditions are met:

- Administrative or clerical services are integral to a project or activity.
- Individuals involved can be specifically identified with the project or activity.
- Such costs are explicitly included in the budget or have the prior written approval of the federal awarding agency; and
- The costs are not also recovered as indirect costs.

The following are considered indirect and should not be included in the Projected Budget as direct costs:

- Information Technology services.
- Rent.
- Utilities and internet service.
- Telephone service (mobile and landline).
- General office supplies; and
- Insurance.

Disqualifications

The following will result in the disqualification of a project proposal:

- Incomplete proposals, including proposals with one or more unanswered question and/or missing, blank, unreadable, corrupt, or otherwise unusable attachments.
- Proposals that include activities outside the grant duration; and
- Proposals with unallowable costs or activities necessary to complete the project.

Review and Notification

Review Criteria

PDA's intent is to fund projects that can produce the highest degree of measurable benefits to Pennsylvania specialty crop producers in relation to each dollar spent. Applicants' Full Proposals will be evaluated on the criteria set forth in the Full Proposal Questions, Scoring, and Review Criteria section of this document.

Review Process

PDA will conduct two levels of review during the Full Proposal process. The first level is an administrative review to determine whether Full Proposal requirements are met and will assess applicants' past PDA grant performances (if any). The second level is a technical review to evaluate the merits of the Full Proposals. The PDA SCBG Program Field Review Panel will perform the technical review. This panel is comprised of a collective representation of growers and industry personnel from public agencies and non-profit entities with an interest and expertise in specialty crop food and agricultural systems. The panel will rank proposals against the evaluation criteria and questions listed on the Technical Evaluation Criteria Score Sheet.

Notification and Feedback

Projects that are disqualified utilizing the criteria above and those not invited to Phase II will be notified. Successful applicants will be invited to Phase II and will receive instructions for submitting a Final Grant Proposal. Applicants not invited to participate in Phase II may contact PDA and request feedback on their Full Proposals.

Assistance and Questions

Questions regarding this grant and/or the competitive solicitation process should be directed to PDA at hzarefoss@pa.gov.